

# PITCHING INDIA

Foreign financiers and broadcasters are interested in Indian documentary filmmakers

by Dinesh Narayanan

**A**lly Derks remembers the day she was having a drink with Michael Moore in a small bar in Washington D.C. in 1989. Moore had just made *Roger and Me*, a searing documentary on the economic devastation of Flint, Michigan, after General Motors shut its plant there leaving thousands of workers jobless overnight.

"The next day, Moore was a mil-

lionaire," says Derks, director of the International Documentary Festival, Amsterdam (IDFA), the world's biggest documentary film festival. Warner Brothers reportedly paid \$3 million for distribution rights to the film which went on to become one of the most popular documentaries ever released in American cinemas. Moore's 2004 blockbuster *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a black-brush portrayal of the George Bush

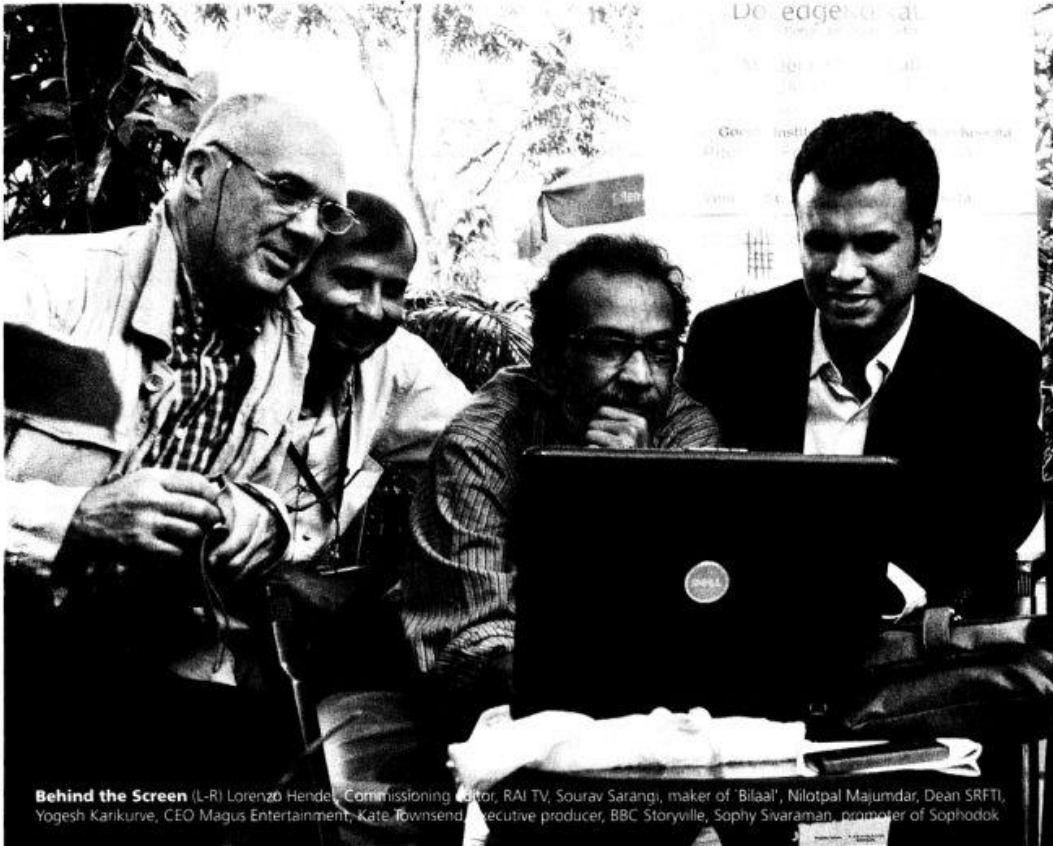


Photo: Getty Images/Boy for Lashes/India

**Behind the Screen** (L-R) Lorenzo Hendel, Commissioning Editor, RAI TV, Sourav Sarangi, maker of 'Bilaal', Nilotpal Majumdar, Dean SRFTI, Yogesh Karikurve, CEO Magus Entertainment, Kate Townsend, executive producer, BBC Storyville, Sophy Sivaraman, promoter of Sophodok

# TO THE WORLD

administration after terrorists wrecked the twin World Trade Centre Towers, made him famous across the world.

Moore, however, is said to have mortgaged his house to make *Roger and Me*. In many developing countries such as India the documentary filmmaker is still like the rookie Moore — unknown, surviving on passion and borrowed money and often wearing the hats of cameraman, director, editor



and producer by himself. This industry exists far behind the arc lights of Bollywood, which has enchanted worldwide audiences with its three-hour stargazers. Things may be changing though. Interest in independent local documentaries is growing as foreign broadcasters and financiers search for content from Asia for curious audiences in Europe and the US.

"India and China are perceived to be the next big markets for documentary distribution and also funding destinations," says documentary evangelist Yogesh Karikurve, whose Magus Entertainment acts as a financing-to-sales platform for independent filmmakers. The rising interest is attracting senior industry professionals from across the world to India.

"There were documentaries about India earlier too. But they were mostly made by Western filmmakers," says Patricia Finneran of the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program, founded by Hollywood actor Robert Redford. "We want films made by local filmmakers from their perspective."

**F**inneran and Derks are two of the many representatives of foreign financiers, broadcasters and other professionals who saw and heard 23 documentary pitches by experienced as well as budding filmmakers, some of them still in college, at the 'Documentaries are Great' festival in Kolkata. In its seventh year now, the festival doubles up as the only platform in Asia where filmmakers can pitch and sell ideas to financiers and broadcasters from different countries. This year it received about 300 applications from filmmakers. About 45 film ideas pitched in its previous editions got assistance from

foreign financiers. "There is a critical gap of financing in India," says Nilotpal Majumdar, dean of Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI) and the driving force of DocedgeKolkata, the festival organiser. Majumdar, who studied editing at Pune's Film and Television Institute of India, says that Indian film schools do not train students in documentaries. Most filmmakers do not know where their film is headed. "You have no idea about the camera-and-character relationship."

The skinny, soft-spoken professor

**Most aspiring documentary filmmakers are clueless on how to go about converting ideas to film**

started the festival in 2004 as a forum for young and inexperienced filmmakers to learn global practices from senior international professionals in focused workshops. They also help filmmakers hone the art of pitching an idea for funding and co-production.

After several discussions with the tutors (mostly foreign pros who help shape an idea and story pitch) you discover your project, says Sourav Sarangi, maker of *Bilaal*, a critically acclaimed film on a three-year-old boy growing up in the slums of Kolkata with his blind parents. "These discussions help shape the idea and language of the film," says Sarangi, who had managed funding for *Bilaal* from the forum.

The pitch is the most vital factor in getting the backing for independent films at such forums because if even one commissioning editor decides to adopt it, he can bring in financiers.

"All independent documentaries are

partnerships," says Maxyne Franklin, director of Channel 4 Britdoc Foundation, a financing and production house that co-produced Rupert Murray's *The End of The Line*, a chronicle of depleting fishing fields. Franklin, a lively Londoner who has studied film and music, is attending the festival for the first time and is impressed by the quality of talent and ideas. With about Euro 200,000 at her disposal every year for early development of films, she hopes to find between one and three films to finance at this festival.

Typically, once a commissioning editor likes an idea and trailer, he discusses it in detail with the filmmaker. He then pitches it to his organisation and also some other financiers. Most of the times about three or four financiers get together to co-produce a film. Rarely, some financiers such as Sundance also offer post-production support with editing and production labs. Sundance, which usually funds films on social and human rights issues, has a \$1.2 million per year fund that has so far supported about 500 films in 62 countries. It receives most of its funding from billionaires like George Soros and Bill Gates who see documentaries as an effective medium of creating awareness and debate on critical issues.

Unlike the US, corporate funding is lower in Europe. Though some companies such as sports goods maker Puma do back documentaries as part of their social initiatives, the big money comes from governments and public-funded broadcasters who have dedicated documentary channels.

Christilla Huillard-Kann, who is in

charge of documentaries at television station ARTE, says that her channels buy about 50 documentaries a year. It spends between Euro 40,000 and 70,000 on pre-buys or initial funding on two or three acquisitions every year. ARTE is a television network run by the German and French governments.

**S**ome big festivals and forums such as IDFA and Sundance have become key centres for matching the flow of ideas with finance. Derks says IDFA, visited by over two lakh viewers every year, receives about a thousand applications of which only 70-80 get through to make four-minute pitches. "Scores of commissioning editors sit around a boxing-ring-like area and instantly decide the fate of each one of them," says Derks.

While such initiatives have invigorated the industry in Europe and the US, the wave has largely left India untouched. Though the occasional filmmaker does get some public attention, most others are clueless on how to go about converting ideas to film.

"Most Indian filmmakers do not even put their salaries as part of the budget while seeking funding," says Magus' Karikurve who believes India has a latent market in its youth bulge. He is hoping to sell

the idea of co-producing documentaries to Indian companies. Karikurve, a post-graduate in international business from Iowa who has worked with television channels and feature film production houses, says local companies lack awareness on how documentaries could be an important part of their CSR or brand-building.

In India, documentaries are made with less than Rs. 10 lakh. Low budgets typically result in low-quality films that do not make the cut internationally. After remaining confined to the SRFTI for budget and space since 2004, the festival moved to the City Centre in 2011.

Festival director Sophy Sivaraman says that the organisers intend to make it a travelling festival from this year onwards. It goes to Coimbatore and Chennai later this year. Sivaraman also runs an online documentary distribution company Sophodok through which she has distributed about 40 foreign films so far.

As the two-day festival wound to a close, some ideas found resonance with commissioning editors. Amsterdam-based filmmaker Rinku Kalsy's pitch to explore the aura of Tamil superstar Rajnikanth and the politics of fandom was well received.

Similarly, Jagannath Krishna pitched to make a film on a conman in Kerala who has never been caught. The conman never cons people of more than Rs. 100 or Rs. 200. "It is almost like he wants to teach his victims a lesson about trust," says Krishna. The pitch got a standing ovation, an indication perhaps that independent documentary making may just be on the verge of taking off. ■



**Spot Light** Ally Derks, International Documentary Festival, Amsterdam



**Say Cheese** Patricia Finneren, Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program